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ABSTRACT

To investigate the effect of heterogeneous and homogeneous instructional groupings used in a middle school eighth grade on selected student behaviors, 120 students were assigned to a heterogeneous group and 120 students to a homogeneous group based on several factors. The heterogeneous group was comprised of all students enrolled in the school band, approximately 20 at-risk students, and other students of differing ability levels. The homogeneous group was comprised of students equal in number to and matched to the ability levels of the band and at-risk students, plus other students of differing ability levels matched to the ability levels of the additional students in the heterogenous group. Data for a 6-month period were gathered to determine if a causal relationship existed between the groupings and student behaviors. The data consisted of direct observations of interactions between students and information obtained from school records, including: (1) number of days absent from school; (2) number of assignments to in-school suspensions; and (3) number of days of out-of-school suspensions. The school records showed that there were fewer absences, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions among the students who were heterogeneously grouped than homogeneously grouped. In addition, there were lower rates of undesirable student behavior and academic failure for the heterogeneous group than for the homogeneous group. (HOD)

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THE EFFECT OF GROUPING ON THE BEHAVIORS OF EIGHTH GRADE STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

School is about two months along. An excited first grade child comes home exclaiming, "I'm in the blue bird reading class!" Two months later the reality sinks in. The blue bird class is for the "slow" readers. The excitement that school brings for many is gone. The most disturbing point about this scenario is that the "blue bird" label will probably follow that child all through school, if not through life.

The decision about which instructional group a child belongs in, is usually made early in the first grade. Teachers make the decision based on their own judgement, sometimes with the assistance of test scores. More regrouping occurs during the first few months of the first grade than thereafter (Goodlad, 1984).

As children enter adolescence, the central developmental features of this group of learners require schools to implement an educational program that allows for variability and dissimilarity (Marvin, 1981). Educators must consider a variety of alternative methods of student grouping. Of utmost concern when selecting a method of grouping should be that it fosters self-reliance through the development of self- concept.

Almost every school that serves the transescent must face the problem of dealing with students' diverse academic skills and, at the same time, minimizing the use of labels that lower students' self-esteem and lead to feelings of apathy (Braddock, 1990). When used wisely, instructional grouping practices help schools meet the students' needs and create a positive learning environment in the schools. Used unwisely, such grouping practices can exaggerate student differences, label students as slow learners, and result in a poor environment for learning.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of two different methods of instructional grouping used in a middle school eighth grade on selected student behaviors.

NULL HYPOTHESIS

There will be no significant difference in the number of days absent, assignments to in-school suspensions, and assignment to out-of-school suspensions of eighth grade students placed in heterogeneous classes when compared to those who are placed in homogeneous classes.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Much of the research on tracking indicates many unfavorable outcomes. Many of the leading educational theorists such as John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and R. E. Slavin (Pigford, 1990; Peltier, 1991) have argued against the practice of tracking. Students in the lower-level track classes suffer both academically and emotionally.

Schools establish norms of achievement and behavior for their students. In an attempt to end deviation from the norm, schools decide to group children by ability. The impulse to standardize students achievement and behavior nourishes negative beliefs about children on the part of teachers, administrators, and parents (Cuban, 1989).

Research show that conditions for learning differ greatly between homogeneous and heterogeneous classes. In high-ability homogeneous classes more class time is spent on instruction involving high level cognitive processes, while low-ability classes spend more time on rote learning. In addition, teachers of low-ability homogeneous classes spend much more time

on discipline and seeking conforming types of classroom behavior. In both cases, middle-level classes are more like the high-ability than the low-ability classes. In almost all instances when heterogeneous grouping is used, it more closely resembled practices of high-ability homogeneous classes (Goodlad, 1984).

As early as 1969, well-known educators, such as William Glasser, were addressing the question of grouping. The arguments that Glasser made against ability grouping in his book, Schools Without Failure are as valid today as they were then. One major point he made is the effect that homogeneous grouping has on teachers which in turn effects the students. Teacher expectation of poor student performance is prevalent where students are placed in tracks in the school. In addition, where children are grouped by ability, teachers often do not appreciate and may even resent the effort of a low-track student who tries to improve.

School is one of the three major influencing factors in a child's life. The structure of the school helps to shape the attitudes and behavior of students (Cuban, 1989). Many children bring with them to school the marks of the home and neighborhood environments. In many cases the school worsens the effects of these marks through the mechanism of separate classes. Homogeneous grouping of students sorts out the differences in students in order to preserve uniformity. Being labeled low ability and forced into classes designed to "remediate" dooms many of these children to failure.

The way students are assigned to classes helps define the students' peer groups. Placing students in a rigid track that produces stable groups of poor achievers produces negative images that accompany placement in the group (Braddock, 1990). THe students internalize the

negative expectations associated with their group and in turn develop low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their abilities as learners. Heterogeneous grouping, on the other hand, reduces the labeling effects and eliminates the possibility of creating a readilly identifiable ability group. Students need the opportunity to be able to identify with the on task peer models that heterogeneous classes afford (Swank, et. al., 1989).

Does the school experience effect the wellness-illness of students? In educational circles there is a growing belief that the school experience can produce short-term and long-term symptoms in students of either health or illness (Taylor, Allred, McCoy, 1992). A general and spreading condition of social, psychological, and physical health seems to be produced among students when school is perceived as a positive and productive place. When the school experience is a series of negative exchanges, this moves the student in the direction of failure and sickness.

If a child feels no one cares whether or not he comes to school, he may elect to stay home when he "doesn't feel good," although he is not sick. Many students in low track classes perceive their teachers as less concerned about them than students in higher track classes (Goodlad, 1984).

METHOD

Subjects

The samples for this investigation were comprised of two eighth grade teams. The two teams consisted of 120 students each. The students were assigned to the teams based on several factors. The heterogeneous group was comprised of all students enrolled in Land and approximately twenty at-risk students. The homogeneous group was comprised of an equal

number of students with equal ability levels as the band and at-risk students. All remaining students were divided between the two groups with equal members of each ability level assigned to each group. In addition, a unique situation existed in the sample, there were three pairs of twins. Each group received one twin from each of two of the pairs and one group received the third pair.

Design and Procedure

Two methods of instructional grouping were used in this study. One team (Team 2) used homogeneous grouping with each student tracked based on academic ability. The other team (Team 1) placed students in heterogeneous classes with some modifications. For math, students were assigned to one of the two algebra classes or to a pre-algebra class. The algebra class received only students of high math ability, and the pre-algebra classes received mixed ability levels. Until the last nine weeks, all the remaining academic classes were heterogeneous classes. For the last nine weeks one science class received 30 low ability students and the remaining classes were mixed ability levels. In addition, an honors pull out for enrichment activities was conducted one day a week for the entire year with the heterogeneous group.

For this study, the heterogeneous group will be referred to as Team 1 or the treatment group. Team 2 in the control group which were homogeneously grouped for instruction.

Data for a six month period (Oct. 15, 1991 to April 15, 1992) were gathered to determine if a casual relationship existed between heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping and student behaviors. The data consist of direct observation of student-student interactions and school records of attendance and disciplinary actions. Three types of data were

used: (1) number of days absent from school, (2) number of assignments to in-school suspensions, and (3) number of days of out-of-school suspensions.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Comparisons were made between the two groups for the six months period on the number of days absent from school, number of in-school suspensions, and number of out-of-school suspensions. Chi square (X^2) was used at the .05 level of significance to determine if there were significant differences in these three indicators of student behavior.

RESULTS

When the school records were compiled, it was found that there were significantly fewer absences, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions among the eighth grade students who were heterogeneously grouped (Team 1) when compared to those who were homogeneously grouped (Team 2).

Due to the large number of students, it was impractical to observe and maintain records of all students. With identical twins available for observation, one pair was selected because of the unique opportunity it presented. Results of personal observations and discussions with other school personnel indicate that the twin assigned to heterogeneous classes was more socially active, had more peer type interactions with different ability groups, exhibited a more positive self concept and had a higher degree of self-esteem. The results of the observations of the twins would tend to further support the original hypothesis.

TABLE I

Effects of Ability Grouping of Eighth Grade Students on Student Behaviors
(October 15, 1991-April 15, 1992)

GROUP	DAYS ABSENT	DAYS TO IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION	DAYS TO OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION	STUDENT FAILURE	RETAINED IN GRADE
TEAM 1 (Hetero-geneous group)	807*	86*	9*	4	1
TEAM 2 (Homo-geneous group)	1019	210	34	7	4

Chi Square = 31.78
* p. < .05, <.01

Table I clearly shows much lower rates of undesirable student behavior on these three indicators for the students who were heterogeneously grouped for instruction. Further, there was also a lower rate of student academic failures for the year (four vs seven). Some of these students made up their work during the summer. There was only one student retained in the eighth grade from the heterogeneous group as compared to four students from the homogeneous group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the research hypothesis; eighth grade students who are placed in heterogeneous classes will have more desirable behaviors than those students placed in homogeneous classes. Students of homogeneous classes had less desirable behaviors represented by

more absences, more in-school suspensions, and more out-of-school suspensions than students of heterogeneous classes. It is possible that the homogeneous classes had other less desirable behaviors that were not documented. Teachers handled these situations within their classes, but the behavior could have affected their academic performance.

The results of this study are consistent with those of Swank, et. al. (1989), Glasser (1969), Taylor, Allred, and McCoy (1992), Braddock (1990) and Goodlad (1984) concerning student behaviors. The evidence clearly supports heterogeneous grouping of middle school students for instruction as it relates to student behavior. If teachers, administrators, and parents look closely at the effects that ability grouping has on our children, it is very likely that homogeneous grouping practices would be eliminated. THese practices are not consistent with the student oriented middle school philosophy.

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(Also See)

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